

Gender Discrimination and Resistance: A Critique of Gender Norms in Black

Cobras

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Abstract

The study highlights the helpless plight of women in a patriarchal society of the Muslim community. The story focuses on the central character, Aashraf, who suffers at the hands of religious norms and cultural practices. Black Cobras is one of the short stories featured in Banu Mushtaq's celebrated book Heart Lamp, which also brought her international fame recently by securing the International Booker Prize. The fate of Aashraf and her children is threatened by every passing moment as they are not offered any help from Mutawalli Saheb or the Mosque. The story reflects on the mythological symbolism of Black Cobras to represent their dual nature of healing and destruction associated with women. The present research paper seeks to situate women's place in society by critiquing prevailing gender norms, customs and practices which are commonly twisted to provide men an advantage. The paper also examines violence and oppression of the women in the community, and it depicts the account of their struggle and resilience. The study is further explored through textual analysis integrating postcolonial feminism and intersectionality. The story serves as a powerful narrative of women who are often betrayed by society and are left to fend for themselves. The paper attempts to shed light on various misdeeds committed against women who eventually resist and rebel against men who control and manipulate religious laws as per their convenience.

Keywords: Gender studies, feminism, patriarchy, oppression, subaltern

Introduction

The present paper highlights the gender disparity faced by women hailing from rural and downtrodden parts of society. It also focuses on the conditions of women in the Muslim

community who are often at the mercy of their husbands, maulvis or religion. *Black Cobras* is a powerful story about women's resilience and challenging prevailing injustice.

"Look, close the door and look after the children. It will be more than a week before I return."

Amina to her husband, Mutawalli.

Banu Mushtaq started writing following a burgeoning outbreak of protest literature across southwestern India during the 1970s and 1980s. The Bandaya Sahitya movement, in its courageous stand against caste and class inequities, paved the way for numerous Dalit and Muslim writers to express their pain in a frank manner. The existence of the body of literature on Muslim women remains limited, which makes women's writing especially important because it allows them to speak for themselves and brings their experiences into focus (Arya Koyal, 2025). Among these rising voices, Mushtaq was one of the few women to write courageously and openly on the daily lives of marginalised groups (Booker Prize Foundation, n.d.). She, along with Sara Aboobakar, emerged as a significant voice, transcribing the lives of Muslim women in Karnataka. Incidentally, both wrote to a local weekly called "The Lankesh Patrike", which was its own cultural movement in Kannada. The current paper sheds light on existing norms for men and women in the Muslim community and the role of women in fighting miscarriages of justice under the pretext of religion and traditional practices.

Black Cobras features in Mushtaq's remarkable collection *Heart Lamp* — the piece which is newly acknowledged at international level and has won the 2025 International Booker Prize. It is about Aashraf, a poor Muslim woman left unattended by her husband. She loses her infant because the mosque authorities and Yakub refuse to help her – and this becomes another indictment on the pervasive injustice of patriarchal and religious authority that pervades society's institutions.

The marginalization of Muslim women in India has been recorded in national reports and academic studies. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) makes it clear that the backwardness faced by Muslims, mainly female Muslim, is due not to religious reasons but rooted in profound social and institutional inequalities. Studies that cover India's landscape identify sustained barriers to income, employment, educational opportunities, personal protection, marriage rights, and survival – all of which together restrict women's mobility and prospects. As Husain, for instance, notes in her broader survey of Muslim women's socio-economic circumstances, intersecting disparities still limit Muslim women's access to basic resources and institutional support (Husain, 2024). Among

the key issues that Muslim women face is polygamy, where men may legally marry more than one wife. Women in polygynous partnerships face higher levels of emotional insecurity, family stress, and social isolation (Karimi et al.). Such emotional vulnerability, and social vulnerability, is also reflected in Aashraf's experience at *Black Cobras*, where she is harassed and humiliated for birthing three daughters. The most important reason why Yakub entered this second marriage is because Aashraf could not give birth to a son and so could not provide a son.

These patterns highlight the long-standing marginalisation that is imprinted on Muslim women's daily lives in ways Banu Mushtaq powerfully renders through Aashraf's experiences in *Black Cobras*. The story also highlights the small acts of courage through which women resist patriarchy, when Amina shows her decision to get the surgery done and thereby take control of her life.

Although gender discrimination has been widely discussed in feminist literary studies, comparatively less attention has been given to the ways in which *Black Cobras* presents resistance alongside oppression. Most readings focus on the existence of patriarchal control, but the text also reveals how individuals negotiate and challenge such structures. This paper therefore examines how gender norms operate within the narrative and how resistance emerges as a response to these oppressive social expectations.

Polygamy

Polygamy is actually a common practice in Islam, although whether it is compatible with women's rights is something to consider. Even though it is permitted in the community, academicians Fitria and Merita say it may not be compatible with modern views. The concept of polygamy can be classified through a feminist perspective as unlawful and may become a barrier to marriage. Aashraf's plight in the story is not unlike the same when her husband Yakub marries another younger girl so that he can experience the pleasure of fathering a boy child. Muttawali, on the other hand, encourages Yakub's resolution to marry again, which underlines male dominance in the narrative.

Objectives of the Study

The research aims to examine the representation of women in traditional settings, especially those hailing from rural and conservative regions. The paper stresses on the following aspects:

- To understand customs and traditions from cultural perspective
- To analyse societal injustice through social theory

- To explore gender inequalities and defiance from feminist lens

Additionally, the text is analysed through the symbolism of *the Black Cobra*, signifying a deeper meaning than meets the eye.

Review of Literature

1. Muslim Women and Structural Marginalisation

The structural disadvantages faced by Muslim communities in India have been extensively researched in several socio-economic studies. According to the Sachar Committee Report, Muslims remain “among the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities” in the country (Sachar). The report highlights some of the difficulties the communities face in accessing education, employment opportunities and economic mobility (Sachar). The report also documents how women in the community experience double inequalities and injustices that intersect with their gender and community (Sachar). Their social roles and agency are often shaped by the layers of social interplay within conservative social contexts.

Feminist scholars studying the experiences of Muslim women in India have found a nexus between various social inequalities that shape their lives. Husain writes that “multiple inequalities intersect” in relation to the experiences of a Muslim woman and the degree of access to resources (Husain). Such overlapping issues stymie the agency and economic autonomy of women. Furthermore, the clear gender norms in the families of these communities will also serve to impose more self-limiting restrictions on women. Literature has been the best source to record these nuanced and multilayered experiences of the Muslim woman, better than any statistic or number (Husain).

2. Feminist Readings of the Religion

And in the Muslim families itself, feminist scholars have noted the way in which religious codes inform restrictive gender roles within families. As Fatima Mernissi argues, “patriarchal power has shaped interpretations of Islam” (Mernissi). She provides historical evidence that all major interpretations of religious texts of Islam were often produced by men. And indeed, religious institutions repeat gender hierarchy in a patriarchal society, reinforcing it, and privileging men again. The feminists' critiques on gender inequality in religious contexts highlight the distinction between faith and interpretation (Mernissi).

3. Feminist Theories of Reproduction

Feminist Theories of Reproduction Feminist research has examined how women are constructed through a process of developing female gender roles connected with motherhood and fertility. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 330). Beauvoir said that women, as defined by social institutions, are often categorized into reproductive capacities and domestic roles. This way, biological capacity becomes a social obligation. This serves to demonstrate how motherhood frequently functions as an instrument of control of a woman's life. Adrienne Rich gives the discourse on reproduction additional breadth (Rich). She separates motherhood as a personal experience from “motherhood as institution” (Rich 13).

4. Serpent Symbolism (“Kari Nāgara Hāvu”)

Serpents are an important symbol in South Asian mythologies. Wendy Doniger adds that serpents often represent fertility and regeneration (Doniger). However, the Kannada expletive ‘Kari Nāgara Hāvu’ can suggest that someone is most dangerous and the curse ‘Kari Nāgara Hāvu kadiya’ can also suggest wishing someone the goriest death by the most poisonous snake.

Methodology

The present textual analysis is an interpretive work guided by a review of the contemporary literature in gender studies, feminist theory and cultural symbolism. Instead of empirical data collection, the study interacts with the primary literary text as well as the relevant theoretical and socio-cultural readings, focusing on the representation of gender discrimination and institutional power in the narrative. Textual analysis allows the researcher to analyze the role played by narrative in these events, the ways in which those narratives’ events, character relationships, and symbolic motifs are used to represent women’s experiences in and through men’s society are presented in a context of patriarchal social structures.

The critical lenses in this study are feminist theoretical perspectives. For centuries, feminist scholars have maintained that gender roles and expectations have been socially and not biologically constructed. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it famously, “one is not born but rather becomes, a woman,” indicating how society determines women’s identities by putting social roles in place regarding motherhood and domesticity (Beauvoir 330). This perspective gives rich evidence to support her position and her argument. Adrienne Rich goes on to distinguish between motherhood as an individual experience and “motherhood as institution,” explaining how reproductive roles are often organized to govern women’s agency (Rich 13). These theoretical

lenses of the study help locate the examination of gender norms and reproductive expectations in a wider feminist view of patriarchal social organisation. In addition, the study uses postcolonial feminist perspectives to place women's experiences in context in a given cultural and social landscape.

The postcolonial feminist scholarship argues that gender inequality can never be studied in isolation from historical and cultural conditions, particularly in societies that have been shaped by complex structures of religion and community. These approaches point out how women's lives are shaped not only by gender but also by overlapping elements like religion, socio-economic status and community norms. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1242) argues in her work with intersectionality for one significant way of understanding the way in which intersecting axes of identity and inequality play out to make women (and by extension minorities) marginalised.

The study goes beyond the critique based on feminism and engages with cultural symbolism within the story as well. Symbolic representations often reflect deeper social attitudes and collective cultural understanding. In South Asian tradition, serpents often symbolize fertility, regeneration and transformation (Doniger 301). At the same time, the serpent represents danger as well as concealed menace in daily language and cultural practice. Located within this larger cultural context the symbolic imagery of cobra allows the study to examine the thematic implications of gender norms and social power dynamics in the narrative.

By this mix of textual analysis and theoretical engagement, the study aims to locate the literary text within broader scholarly discourses concerning gender, religion, and cultural symbolism. This way, the research investigates the way literary narratives both represent and critique larger social systems that influence women's lives.

Results and Findings

The textual analysis shows that the narrative consistently reflects the unequal expectations imposed on women within patriarchal society. The characters experience discrimination through social restrictions, moral judgement, and gendered power relations embedded within everyday interactions. At the same time, the text does not portray women merely as passive victims; instead, it presents moments of resistance that challenge established gender norms. Through these representations, *Black Cobras* critiques systems of gender oppression and foregrounds the struggle for agency and self-expression.

Discussion

Black Cobras can be placed in this broader context of the literary discourse on inequalities, institutional power, and reproductive demands that we reviewed. The story shows how gender norms are established and enforced within a patriarchal society in which women's identities and social capital are frequently connected with their reproductive selves. Feminist scholarship, however, has stressed, over and over, that motherhood is often not just biological, but social, and socially regulated. Adrienne Rich characterizes this phenomenon as "motherhood as institution," in which women's lives are organised in accordance with reproductive expectations that reinforce patriarchal control (Rich 13). Within the social conditions portrayed in the story, the social pressure to give birth to male children becomes an important criterion of women's value, paralleling wider societal ideas around blood relations and family succession.

The idea, further developed by Simone de Beauvoir, that one "is not born a woman, but becomes a woman" demonstrates how gender roles are socially constructed and maintained within norms in culture as well as within institutions of society (Beauvoir 330). Society structures womanhood into a set of roles defined by social structures which can then force women to fulfill specific familial roles as well. Expectations like these reduce women's identities to their ability to fulfill reproductive and domestic responsibilities, thus restraining their agency both within the family and wider society. For feminist theorists, such norms serve as mechanisms through which patriarchal societies police women's behaviour and determine their social status.

It also sheds a light onto institutional authority that supports gender hierarchies. Feminist readings of religion have argued that there is a distinctiveness between religious belief and patriarchal understanding of what it means to be religious and how this informs religious institutions. According to Fatima Mernissi, historical interpretation of Islamic texts was often forged in predominantly male discourses and, as a consequence, was used to entrench gender hierarchies within many Muslim societies (Mernissi). Religious authority structures in such contexts can lead to social expectations of marriage, of family roles, of women's behaviour. The institutional authority which permeates the narrative thus mirrors larger debates over ways in which religious interpretations might intersect with patriarchal social systems.

The other dimension of the narrative also connects to the intersection of gender, socio-economic status, and community structures. In her work on intersectionality, feminism argues that women

and their experience is not exclusive to gender, and that others including class, religion, and economic vulnerability need to be considered. Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of "intersectionality" (Crenshaw 1242) illuminates how intersecting axes for identity and marginalisation impact on women's experiences of discrimination. In the context represented in the narrative, women may experience overlapping social expectations that inhibit their movement, freedom of action, and institutional support.

Finally, the symbolic aspect of the story complicates the narrative of gender and power. Serpent images have always been very complex in South Asian culture, which has long celebrated them with reference to fertility, regeneration, and transformation (Doniger 301). On one hand, the snake also represents threats in cultural symbolism. Black Cobras use a symbolic meaning, thus suggesting a symbol—one that simultaneously symbolizes life, fertility, and potential harm. In Kannada cultural usage, the term "Kari Nāgara Hāvu" is sometimes used metaphorically to mean a person who is seen as dangerous or morally corrupt. This conceptual indeterminacy also represents the ideological tug that exists between the narrative, through the cultural norms of what is expected of gender and fertility, what people are told in such a way, and the social fear of morality, power, and control.

Taken together, these thematic elements illustrate how the narrative engages with broader questions surrounding gender norms, institutional authority, and cultural symbolism. By situating the story within these scholarly discussions, the text can be understood as reflecting the complex social realities that shape women's lives within patriarchal and religiously structured communities.

Conclusion

But the paper has sought to locate Black Cobras within a discourse of gender norms, religious authority, and cultural symbolism. Such analysis also demonstrates how the experience of one's womanhood in patriarchal communities must be read through feminist theory, postcolonial feminist thought and intersectionality. Feminist studies have long demonstrated that gender roles are not predestined; rather, they are constructed by society, shaped often due to expectations of marriage, motherhood and family obligations. In these structures, women's identities are often associated with reproductive roles, especially in societies that still have strong beliefs about lineage and inheritance. The paper also emphasises the institutional authority at play in defining and implementing gender norms. As Fatima Mernissi has suggested, we know that many of the

constraints on women in religious contexts are not related with faith per se, but with the patriarchal understandings of religious doctrines and teachings. Such narratives can establish community norms and perpetuate social hierarchies that cater to male power. When these structures are used along with socio-economic vulnerability and a lack of access to institutional support, they may also hinder women's agency and autonomy.

At the same time, it is in symbolic terms how narrative comes with a key cultural dimension to the story. Serpent imagery, deeply rooted within South Asian cultural practices, represents both fertility and danger and serves to mirror the double meanings of reproduction, morality and power. The cobra is not only a symbolically derived and associated image from more general aspects of the culture but also the contradictions in the cultural world view concerning the relation between conventional cultural interpretations and individual self.

In the aggregate, the narrative's themes demonstrate the mechanisms that gender discrimination is mediated by, i.e. how it becomes a composite of culture, institutional framework and symbolism (the cultural practices, the symbolic meanings, etc.). Placing the narrative within extant academic discourse on gender, religion, and social inequality, the work has enabled one to form a more robust understanding of literary stories as they take in women lived experiences in complex sociocultural settings

Recommendations

Further research may examine Black Cobras using broader feminist approaches such as intersectional or postcolonial feminism. Comparative studies with other literary texts dealing with gender and resistance may also help in understanding how contemporary literature responds to patriarchal structures and social inequality.

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